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Introduction

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Introduction

Belgium has experienced crises of all kinds, dating back to the founding of the country in 1830. These include two world wars, the long process of federalism, and the recent legislative crisis, in which it took 535 days to form a government.¹ The official website for Belgium, "Portail belgium.be", acknowledges that "[r]econciling regional and cultural identities within a federal structure is easier said than done".² The crisis was eventually resolved however, and bore witness in the process to a certain resilience and flexibility of the Belgian model. The necessary diplomatic skills of "concertation et co-opération", and "arbitrage des conflits d'intérêt ou de compétence", which had been identified by Georges-Henri Dumont back in the early 1990s when he published *La Belgique: hier et aujourd'hui*, have endured despite multiple challenges and setbacks.³ These terms were used to analyse the Belgian federal model. However, they also pertain to the broader historical, social and cultural legacies of Belgium, from involvement in world wars, to decolonisation, globalisation and the negotiation of shifting representations of "identity". Affirmations of "belgitude" co-exist with claims of non-identity, famous for *not being* famous, according to Patrick Røgiers, "ce triste pays d'amnésie, sans identité propre, sans langue et sans mémoire".⁴ Belgium is a nation that has been known as both the cockpit and crucible of Europe, "l'impossible amalgame",⁵ a melting pot of identities and nationalities (according to Jacques Sojcher, a "bricolage" of identities; "une identité en creux" according to Marc Quaghebeur), with a sharply drawn oppositional internal dynamic between Flemish and French speakers.⁶ Jean-Marie Klinkenberg writes of Belgium as "la patrie de la négociation".⁷ The glue that holds the various communities together within the entity that is "Belgium", "Belgique", "België", "Belgien"... has been tested for its durability and elasticity.

¹ See Angelique Chrisafis, "Eurozone crisis forces Belgium to finally form a government", Guardian Online, Thursday 1 December 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/dec/01/eurozone-crisis-forces-belgium-government> [consulted 29 July 2013].

² See the online portal for Belgian affairs, [http://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/government/federale_staats/](http://www.belgium.be/en/about_belgium/government/federale_staats) [consulted 29 July 2013].

³ *La Belgique: hier et aujourd'hui* (Paris: PUF, 1991), pp. 123-24. See also *Belgitude et crise de l'état belge*, ed. by H. Dumont et al. (Bruxelles: Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 1989).

⁴ *Le Mal du Pays* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁶ See *La Belgique malgré tout*, ed. Jacques Sojcher, Special Issue, *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles* (Bruxelles: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1980), and A. Pickels and J. Sojcher, "Belgiques", in *Belgique toujours grande et belle*, *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles*, 1-2 (1998), pp. 11-16 (p. 11). The term "en creux" is used by Quaghebeur in his chapter heading, "Amnésie et fausses fictions dessinent une identité en creux", in *Balises pour l'histoire des Lettres belges de langue française* (Bruxelles: Labor, 1998), p. 19. For further consideration of the terms, see my "Introduction", in *Culture and Identity in Belgian Francophone Writing: Dialogue, Diversity and Displacement* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 14-22.

⁷ *Petites mythologies belges* (Bruxelles: Labor, 2003), p. 65.

The art of negociation does not negate a willingness to question assumptions and to challenge received ideas, as many of the francophone Belgian authors who write in, of, and about “crisis” demonstrate.⁸ On the University undergraduate course which I teach, entitled “Exploring Belgian Identities”, we currently study Suzanne Lilar’s *Une Enfance gantoise*, Jean Muno’s *Histoire exécrable d’un héros brabançon*, Amélie Nothomb’s *Stupeur et tremblements*, Nicole Malinconi’s *Nous deux/Da solo*, and Pie Tschibanda’s *Un fou noir au pays des blancs*.⁹ The theme of crisis can be traced in these texts in various ways, not least most obviously as identity crisis, and in depictions of belonging and alienation. Crisis is also played out in terms of language and form, from Muno’s pastiche and parody to Lilar’s exploration of ‘in-between’ spaces, and Tschibanda’s reflections on the legacies of colonialism in the depiction of the life of a Congolese man in Brussels. These are but a few examples; many more could be taken from the works of Conrad Detrez, Lydia Flem, Jacqueline Harpman, Caroline Lamarche, Pierre Mertens, Patrick Røgiers, Dominique Rolin, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, and Marguerite Yourcenar, amongst others. My encounters with these writers, alongside the changing contemporary Belgian landscape, informed my choice of subject matter for this Special issue.

The volume includes authors, theorists, texts, and films from different periods and contexts and in the light of changing critical, literary and cultural perspectives on Belgium and its artistic and cultural canons. It brings together filmmakers, comic strip artists, political commentators, authors, and psychoanalysts, including Chantal Akerman, Henry Bauchau, Raymond De Becker, Elisa Brune, Louis Carette, Nathalie Gassel, Michel de Ghelderode, Émile Leclercq, and Pierre Nothomb. At first sight this is an eclectic grouping to say the least, and for whom, as I hope will become evident, crisis informs their work in different ways. The Special issue opens with contributions on film and the comic strip, artforms for which Belgium is particularly renowned: Annick Pellegrin, on *Spirou*, the weekly Belgian comics magazine, and Marion Schmid, on Chantal Akerman, one of Belgium’s most innovative filmmakers. Pellegrin considers artists’ responses to the political, historical, social and linguistic challenges which have faced Belgium in the *bande dessinée*. She analyses the humorous depictions of

⁸ Daniel Laroché in his review of Jean-Marie Klinkenberg’s *Petites mythologies belges*, reiterates Klinkenberg’s words that “Le Belge sait rire de lui-même”, Review of *Petites mythologies belges* (Bruxelles: Les Impressions nouvelles, 2013), revised and updated edition, *Le Carnet et les instants*, No. 177, June-September 2013, p. 82.

⁹ *Une Enfance gantoise* (Paris: Grasset, 1976; 2nd edition, Bruxelles: Labor, 1998); *Nous deux/Da solo* (Bruxelles: Labor, 2002); *Histoire exécrable d’un héros brabançon* (Bruxelles: Éd. Jacques Antoine, 1982), reprinted by Éditions Labor, 1998; *Stupeur et tremblements* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999); *Un fou noir au pays des blancs* (Bruxelles: Le Grand Miroir, 2007).

deeply serious challenges by Dugomier and Ers, Dal and Bercovici, and Feroumont. Schmid explores Akerman's adaptation of the Joseph Conrad novel *Almeyer's Folly*, and considers how the story offers scope for the challenging of colonialist discourse via experimental filming and *mise-en-scène*. Edouard Glissant's theorisations of 'creolising' processes are used to highlight a decentring dynamic in the adaptation. The film is presented as a work of art which rejects essentialist or didactic discourses; it is rather a fluid space which privileges the sensuous.

Intersections of history and literature then come to the fore in analyses of threatened identities. Estrella de la Torre Giménez presents the work of 19th century author Émile Leclercq. She assesses his contribution to the development of the realist aesthetic in Belgian literature, and documents the ways in which his works engaged with the social crises affecting Belgium in the second half of the 19th century. Catherine Emerson deals with a later crisis in her essay: she concentrates on the period of the Occupation in Belgium. Where Giménez considers Leclercq's attack on those who abused the power of their position, especially the clergy, to highlight injustices in society, Emerson takes a group of francophone intellectuals who were sympathetic, in different ways, to the Nazi occupation of the country. Emerson uses Hayden White's theory of emplotment to tease out the different ways in which the use of narrative modes can be linked to particular ideologies, in the ways in which the writers tell stories about history. Her argument is that a variety of motivations underlined their different approaches, and she considers the use of past, present and future in their conceptualisations.

In addition to the political crises of identity that are examined in Emerson's analysis, are the crises of literary identity concerning the writer and francophone Belgian literature more generally. Fabrice Schurmans examines Henry Bauchau's *La Déchirure* in terms of the inscription of both personal and collective crises in the text. He highlights links and shifts between internal and external points and conflicts, and argues that Bauchau's text anticipates the questioning of Belgian literary identity that would come with the explosion of "belgitude" in the 1970s. Identity crisis is also a key preoccupation in the writings of Nathalie Gassel and Elisa Brune. In the works examined here, alienation from self, and from family, is foregrounded in their narrators' textual self-constructions, and depictions of society. Adrienne Angelo explores Gassel's experimental writing practices: the processes of self-(re)construction of the artist, in the light of Gassel's own construction as androgynous bodybuilder. She explores the themes of otherness, marginality and exile in Gassel's œuvre, and within the wider context of francophone Belgian writing. Her erotic and philosophical writings, incorporating childhood memoirs, autofictional pornographic writings, and photo-texts, engage with debates about

mind-body relationships to challenge existing norms about selfhood and identity. For Elisa Brune, crises of identity are overshadowed by collective crises within the family domain. Caroline Verdier traces Brune's critique of the family in the light of literary and sociological theories in her detailed textual analysis of *La Tournante* and *Blanche cassé*. In the process, she assesses the pertinence of Brune's subject matter for contemporary social critiques.

The volume engages with both the ideologies and the aesthetics of crisis, in ways which elucidate, challenge, and sometimes disturb. It is hoped that this Special issue on the theme of crisis testifies to the diversity of responses in art, film, and literature, to highlight the ways in which periods of intense difficulty or danger have presented opportunities for creative exploration, experimentation, critique, and review.